

## Frank Homan

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November 6, 2005

Frank R. Homan was 75 years old when he died this past summer from cancer. Frank and his wife, Bernie, had been members of First Church for over twenty years. Frank was a successful engineer with GE, and through his work, eventually won the highest civilian honor from the French government, the Chevalier Legion of Honor. You probably didn't know that. I didn't know that until Frank died and I saw the award. Frank didn't talk about awards because community and family, his wife, Bernie, their three sons, daughter-in-laws, and nine grandchildren, mattered more to him.

This was one of the reasons I loved Frank. When I was candidating to be the minister of First Church in 1998, Frank was President of the Board of Trustees. I remember my first impression of him – quiet, intelligent, attentive, a lovely slow smile, and with the slightest of accent when he spoke, from...somewhere. Frank was the person who stood in the Thornton Room and announced that I was the new minister of First Church.

I got to know Frank as a lay leader and steward in this congregation, as a respected member who loved a graph and a plan. It was only later that I learned he was Jewish and a Holocaust survivor. His accent was a mixture of German and French, from Germany where he was born, and France where he grew up until escaping from Europe and arriving in the United States in 1946.

Frank's father was killed in Auschwitz, and his family lost all their money, their home, their belongings, but not one another. Frank, his mother, sister, and maternal grandfather all survived with the help of extended family in Switzerland and the United States, as well as with their own pluck and luck. And although Frank's father, Richard, was murdered, his legacy remained with the family in positive, vital ways, which I will share with you later.

Last summer it was my privilege to walk with Bernie and Frank through Frank's final illness. One day last spring while visiting with him I asked him if we could do a service at First Church on his experiences during WWII this fall, and he said "Yes." Frank told me he would like copies of his memoirs placed on sale and the proceeds to go to the First Church Endowment Fund (remember what I said about Frank valuing community), which is what we are doing, and Betty Cavanaugh will have the remaining copies of his memoirs on sale after the service today. We will also be discussing his memoirs this Tuesday, November 8, at 7:00 p.m. at First Church. Please come.

I wanted to do a service on Frank's experiences for several reasons, first because I believe that the story and stories of the Holocaust need to be told for truth and growth. Frank was also a teacher to me and to many others. I was fascinated with Frank's ability

to survive and thrive in the face of such devastating deprivation and loss. His memoirs also demonstrate the power of choice and small acts of kindness and resistance in a world gone mad.

Franz Beno Heumann was born on March 5, 1927 in Ulm Germany. His parents, Richard Heumann and Louise Einstein married in 1918 and settled in Laupheim, Germany where the Heumann's were prominent and had lived for several generations. Frank's older sister, Marianne, was born in 1920. Laupheim was a small village and Frank's father, Richard, was the well-respected Director of the local state bank. Frank's father was also a veteran of the German army, having served and lost part of his arm during the Battle of Verdun in WWI.

In his memoirs Frank writes of his father

My father, like many assimilated German Jews, considered himself a patriotic German, and was well integrated in local German society. He was a free thinker, a liberal, and to the chagrin of my very religious and observant maternal grandfather, not an observant Jew.

The Heumann's lived a good life. Richard's job was good and he had an uncanny knack for purchasing unusual European antiques. Both of Frank's parents had extended family nearby. However, given the year of his birth, Frank's earliest memories regularly involve persecution. He only had one clear memory of the Nazi's.

One day when I was at my grandparent's house which was located on an elevated area overlooking the main street below . . . I watched a parade of "Brown-Shirts," called the "SA" . . . marching parade style in the street below, singing and carrying flags with the swastika. I remember hiding so I would not be seen. I was then 6 years old.

There is a photograph of young Frank that was taken just a few years after this memory. It is one of my favorite photographs of him. He is standing with a group of boys in front of two "old world" houses with shutters. Frank is short, slender, with an amazing shock of dark brown hair sticking up from his head. He is smiling and in his face I see both the boy he was and the man he would become.

When this very boy was six years old he knew to hide if adults in uniforms went marching with swastikas. He could not have understood why he was not safe. His household was loving, his parents attentive, his village beautiful, but he was never safe. And when I look at the photograph of Frank I wonder, "How could anyone scare that boy, any boy, any child for any reason?"

That same year, in 1933, Richard Heumann was jailed by the Nazis and forced to resign as Director of the local bank. Less than a year later, in 1934 German friends warned the family that local Nazis and some from Austria were serious about destroying Jewish businesses and families. The Heumann's packed a few belongings and went to Switzerland, and then settled in Paris.

In 1935 the Heumann's opened a laundry business, Blanchisserie Pour Vous ("Laundry For You"). Louise and Richard were clever, industrious, and devoted to family. They had their furnishings and antiques sent from Laupheim to Paris. Louise

managed the books for the business and the household, Richard managed the laundry business and looked for new business, and everyone tried to stay away from the Germans. In 1938, Louise's father, Emmanuel, came to live with the family.

This worked until 1939 when Richard was detained for two months for being a German alien (his papers said "Stateless/Formerly German"). He was once again released after signing a pledge of allegiance to France. Around this time, Frank's older sister, Marianne, who worked small jobs in Paris, was able to come to the United States, where she remained throughout the war.

In May 1940 the French detained Frank's father for the last time (French detained his father and ultimately sent him to the Germans). As Frank recalls "I remember accompanying my dad to the entrance of the Vel D'Hiver stadium in May 1940; we went by metro [how civilized in an uncivilized world]. He was carrying a small suitcase. That was the last time I saw him." Frank was thirteen years old.

Shortly thereafter the Germans invaded France and the Heumann's (Louise, Emmanuel, and Frank) fled south from Paris in a car with friends. However the roads were jammed with others fleeing, and when all the cars ran out of gasoline everyone continued on foot, throwing away luggage as it became too heavy. Frank recalls

We were walking through some small village, just a few hundred feet behind a small convoy consisting of a fire truck, several pushcarts, and people on foot. We heard airplanes, first faintly in the distance, then louder and louder followed by the high pitched whine of the German Messerschmidt dive bombers called 'Stukas,' in a dive. Then came the sound of machine gun fire. We ran to take cover inside the doorway of the nearest house. When we emerged we saw several people from the convoy apparently wounded and covered with blood . . . this was no longer an interesting adventure – we were scared!"

That night while sleeping in a restaurant in Blois, the Stukas returned, bombing close to the city. Frank slept through the bombing while glass shattered around and on top of him. I find this remarkable, Frank at 13, still with a child's ability to sleep through the impossible. This was the period Frank remembered forty eight years later while being wined and dined at Chateau Chambord with GE executives.

The Heumanns spent six weeks alternatively fleeing and hiding, avoiding German and French police, surviving bombing attacks, and scrounging for food. The Courtas family of Blois, knowing all the risks, hid the Heumanns in their hayloft while other local families refused. Frank always considered the Courtas family great heroes. They helped the Heumann's friends, the Vogels, escape, at great personal risk to themselves. They also helped the Heumann's return to Paris at the end of June 1941, where they connected the Heumann's to their son, Jean Courtas, who was a Paris Police Inspector. Upon meeting them in Paris Jean said, "Any friend of my mother is a friend of mine." No questions asked.

In his memoirs Frank never comments on why the Courtas family was so gracious in their efforts to harbor fleeing "fugitives" so as much as I want to know, I can't tell you why they helped the Heumanns. What is clear from Frank's memoirs is that many individual and average people did help the Heumann's, their concierge, Frank's school in Paris, a postman, even German soldiers, strangely enough on one occasion. This reminds

me how much each of us has the power to choose compassion over fear and love over hate, and that our individual choices make a difference. It also reminds me of the power of small resistance, the person who gave them food, showed them a safer path, let them stay in a barn, knowing this family was being hunted and helping them put their hosts at risk. The small help means everything, both for survival and the larger notion that human civility exists in chaos.

In the coming years the family continued to manage, periodically and dangerously sending Frank out without the Nazi required "Star of David" to sell family antiques so the family could survive. In August 1942 Jean Courtas saved the Heumann's by warning them of an impending round up. Strangely, when the police came they were only looking for Frank's mother. As Frank remembers, here is what his quiet mother chose to do on this occasion

It is in times of great stress and hardship that ones true mettle and courage emerges. My mother decided she would not go without putting up resistance. She went to bed and when the police returned she told them that she was too sick to leave, that she was bleeding and could not be moved; part of which was true. . They tried to convince her to come along but she became very vocal about her terrible medical condition and refused to leave her bed. In retrospect it seems clear to me that her motivation to resist was not such much fear for herself as it was concern for me and her father without my support. Great credit must be given to both our landlady, Mme Goudineau and to Mme Morin, the Concierge from across the street. These two French ladies were of great help in the delaying effort, by taking our side, berating the French police for their inhumane treatment, and voicing their disapproval of the police action. There was great turmoil, shouting and confusion on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of our building as a result.

But the police did leave, promising to return the next morning. So the Heumann's hid in an apartment, acquired false papers and once again fled south hoping to reach Richard's sister, Mariele, in Switzerland. The intuition and effort of Frank's mother is remarkable, as was the assistance from their neighbors.

That same month a letter from Richard was returned to the family in Paris, and for the next 49 years, until Frank discovered his father's name on a list of prisoners killed at Auschwitz, Richard's fate remained uncertain. It wasn't until conducting further research eight years after that, that Frank learned his father died just three weeks after arriving in Auschwitz. But during the war the family did not know this, and kept searching for him (two moving letters from Mme Schmitz to Frank's mother after the war).

In August 1942 the Heumann's were arrested in southern France and sent to local concentration camps. Frank was fifteen years old. Two months later they were miraculously (and individually) released and reunited. Once again they attempted to acquire papers and reach Switzerland with the help of the French underground. Thanks to Mariele, this time they acquired legal entry papers, but travel was not legal for Jews.

So, on the cold night of January 3, 1943, the one night when the Italians had withdrawn and the Germans had not yet arrived, the Heumanns crossed the very dangerous French/Swiss border. They were cold, wet, and hungry, but they were in Switzerland, safe for the remainder of the war with Richard's sister, Mariele

Brandenburger, a citizen of Switzerland who worked relentlessly and successfully to get the Heumann's legally into Switzerland. The family remained in Switzerland for the duration of the war and emigrated to the United States in 1946 with the help of Louise's brother, Hugo, who was a citizen of the United States.

The Heumann family displayed striking tenacity, creativity, and loyalty. Always the family stayed together. Always Frank's mother and father tenaciously returned to legal authorities and anyone else who could give them papers and passage, no matter how dangerous. Always they kept looking for one another after they were separated, which seems to me, the ultimate love story for a couple and a family.

Frank worked hard to put himself through college. He had the good sense to marry Bernie in 1951, and then he was hired by GE. I'm not sure he ever articulated this, but he then went about doing what his father, mother, and grandparents had shown him how to do, create and love a family and community. He had three sons, and when they married, he treated his daughter-in-laws like daughters. He loved his nine grandchildren; he and Bernie generously gave to and participated in causes they cared about. They were involved in the life of this church. To know Frank was really to love Frank. The man inspired trust and devotion, which is also what he gave.

I also think it is remarkable that he never told his sons he was a Holocaust survivor until they were adults. He never told them as children. He let them enjoy the childhood he did not have, and then told them when they were adults. I think he wanted his children to be free of the Holocaust to the extent that they could be free. But when he wrote his memoirs he dedicated them to his children and their families. He wanted the truth to be known, but not to overwhelm. This was a remarkably wise and caring thing to do. And I can't help but note that Frank created a successful dignified family community life for himself, which is what the Nazis tried so hard to destroy. They did not succeed.

Part of Frank's success began in his marriage with Bernie, a relationship he carefully treasured. Note to other couples present, always treat your partner like a treasure. Frank wrote me letters in his final illness, and almost every letter ended with something like "Bernie could not be more dedicated and loving and making the best of the situation. A better caregiver and nurse could not exist." Another letter said, "Bernie is the wise one in the family." Frank really understood what makes a person, family and community (not money, power, looks, fame, but family and community). And consider how much family and community he lost in his childhood. He just recreated it all over again.

An extraordinary portrait of Frank's father, Richard, hangs in the Homan house. Richard is well-dressed, with a penetrating, haunting stare. Richard Heumann knew how to direct a bank, start a laundry business, when to collect antiques and how to sell them when cash was needed. Frank always missed his father, and thought more and more about him towards the end of his life. But the more I have thought about it, the more I have become convinced that Richard did a remarkable job with his son. He taught him to care and fight for family and community, to struggle and survive, to believe in himself, to persevere.

Before Frank died I had a dream that the soles of his father's shoes were in America. A friend pointed out to me "soles" can also be "souls." When I told Frank this dream he told me that his father had the most unusual feet, and always wore through the

soles of his shoes. I like to think that the best parts of Richard remained in Frank, with him, throughout his life.

I learned a lot from Frank, particularly from his response to his early loss and suffering. In a letter Frank sent me this past winter he wrote

I seem to have much more empathy with others who suffer or are down on their luck and when I read the paper in the morning I find myself sometimes near tears; this is particularly true if the article is about the holocaust and aftermath. Any regrets that I brood about center on missed human contact mainly concerning my sister and the fact that I never visited Auschwitz. But the most important lesson from this remarkable teacher (Morrie in *Tuesdays with Morrie*) is that “it ain’t over, till its over” and that I can still shape the rest of my life by contributing to Bernie, my kids and particularly grandkids and the community (including First Church).

This, of course, is what Frank did. He taught me a way to live with pain and loss while creating a better life for himself and others. What a gift.

In another letter he wrote to me

What I have most wished for is courage and forbearance. I’ve always been intrigued and admired those people who have real courage – courage in the face of adversity – courage when the outcome is uncertain –courage based on strong convictions

I remember receiving that letter and thinking, Frank is so humble he doesn’t know that he has courage and forbearance, how much we are intrigued by and admire him because he had real courage. Cancer is a frightening disease. But I think it is like Frank wrote of his mother, “It is in times of great stress and hardship that ones true mettle and courage emerges.” No one knows how to face loss and hardship. We do it by continuing one day at a time with the most dignity, hope, and compassion he can manage while just trying to survive.

In living Frank taught me a lesson I will never forget. The good life lives in family and community, and if you lose it all, recreate it again. If you don’t know how, ask for help and just keep at it. Keep at it. You don’t have to have all the answers. No one does. Just keep at it, helping yourself and others in equal measure.

Frank was just one of many members here, and everyone has a story to tell. Whether you are a new visitor or an old member, get to know someone here, try getting to know an older member here. Our older members have great stories and lessons and perspectives on life. And come to memorial services at First Church, to respect our member, to honor and value life, to reflect on what really matters in your life, and to learn. Our members, like Frank, are a treasure and since it “ain’t over till its over,” we all have some more learning to do.

I really miss Frank, his voice, his look, his quiet, perceptive presence. But more and more I am just grateful I had the privilege to know him at all.

